Five Million Yen: Chapter 28

by Daniel Harris

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Ben watched Monique disappear into the first-class cabin. It didn't seem likely that he would see her again after this flight. Monique was a woman one would marry and raise four kids with, she was no zipless fuck-girl. A perfect mother type. He returned to his seat feeling more confused and helpless than the horrible Saturday night in the Artists Studios five nights ago in Manhattan where he found himself naked and hopeless surrounded by the dregs of society.

The noise level in the cabin increased as the passengers consumed drinks and were eating and talking. Ben knew soon they would be snoring and farting. What would he be doing? He looked at his pad of paper and his list. Why did he ever agree to deliver these toxic paintings for Gringovitch? Why did he get involved with Dan Arris? He was just a journeyman musician with a good reputation and no real global fame. He took a sip of his coffee. Ice cold. Ben looked in the flight magazine for the movie offerings. The eastbound movie was *Three Days of the Condor*. He had seen it five times in airplanes in three months. He decided to sleep and lay down across the three seats. From experience he knew exactly how to adjust the extra pillows he'd taken to make a comfortable bed.

Just as he was nodding off, it hit him: Claudia was faking her injury. If she were to meet Dan Arris in Paris at the Ritz on Saturday, she would not be going back to New York, especially if she was to tail Ben Thursday and Thursday night in Nice and Marseilles. She had probably arranged her schedule to be off-duty Thursday until at

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least Sunday. Yes, Claudia knew best because she was in control. Maybe she was still married to Arris and was his partner in crime. She did say she owed him big-time. What did that mean? Tailing some musician around Provence didn't seem like owing someone big-time. What were they going to do in the Ritz? Probably have a two-person orgy. One didn't book rooms in the Ritz to sleep for the night unless one was stupid rich. Maybe Arris was schmoozing a rich potential buyer. Having a beautiful woman on his arm, wife or not, would be an asset.

Claudia represented a threat to Ben's freedom of movement and an affront to his integrity. If everything went as Arris planned, it would be pleasant to have Claudia as a traveling companion. Apparently only Ben knew that Yolande had been compromised, so any deviation he made from Arris's plan would trigger alarms in Claudia. Using her direct conduit to Arris she would report any hitches in the plan. What was the rule: Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Claudia was certainly an enemy. Maybe he should go along with the charade of the broken ankle and keep her with him at all times. He might even get lucky in the sex department. She was still an accessible and attractive woman, broken ankle or not.

Ben's mind was working in overdrive. How do I solve this problem? Somehow I have to hide from her the fact that I know that Yolande is compromised. But I need to go to Yolande's restaurant and see what compromised means. I need to ditch Claudia for the time it takes to check Yolande's restaurant.

He also had to see Gabe Benjamin. What did Gringovitch say about Gabe? He was a guy who knew how to find, do, or get anything, anywhere. Could Gabe help him out? Or was Gabe a mole, too? Christ, how could one guy have so many adversaries on one airplane?

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Gabe saw Ben talking to the attractive Dutch stewardess from first class. It didn't look like Ben was going to score. He saw him walk back to his seat in the second row of tourist class. Gabe had

never had sex in the sky. He should ask Ben about it when they talked. He hoped Claudia had mentioned that he wanted to talk to Ben

Gabe was pissed at Gringovitch. Why would “a friend” leave a note like the one he had received from Gringovitch? Ben seemed like a capable guy. It was a simple job. Just deliver a couple of paintings. Clearly, there must be something more than a simple delivery; otherwise, why all this worry by Gringovitch? Maybe there was something else involved in the delivery..

Gabe knew Nice and Provence very well. He had spent six months filming a movie there and had been to the Cannes Film Festival every year for the last fifteen years. As a touring musician, Ben must have played at the Grand Parade du Jazz, or any of the other jazz festivals in Provence. Ben wasn't a total naïf about Nice or the Côte d'Azur.

Gabe liked Ben. He seemed like a regular hip musician: Too honest for his own good, but a trustworthy guy. In many respects he was typical: too much time in practice rooms, limited social skills, and your basic ingénue in the theater of life. Gabe decided to help Ben. Gabe knew Ben's group, *Pieces of Eight,* was the hardest-driving avant-garde jazz group in New York and probably the world. They were history book.

The movie came on the repeater screens in tourist class.

-Damn, how many times do I have to watch *Three Days of the Condor*? wondered Gabe, I just saw it coming in from L.A. last week.

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When the movie started, Ben decided to go visit Gabe. He had to be careful. He hardly knew the guy, but Anatoly had said Gabe was a go-to guy. On the other hand, maybe Gringovitch had hired Gabe to tail him. It seemed like in the art business no one trusted anyone. The thought crossed Ben's mind, How many pictures in the Louvre were fakes? He knew Beethoven had sold “copies in my hand” scores of his *Ninth Symphony* to at least three monarchs in Europe. Ben figured fraud was S.O.P in the high stakes world of art and music.

The stewardesses had just finished clearing the dinner dishes, so the aisle was clear. Ben got up and walked down the aisle to Gabe Benjamin's seat.

-Hey, Gabe, it's me, Ben Clarone. We had a beer in Brooklyn at Jack's Park Slope Tavern, Monday night. Do you remember me?

-Absolutely, Ben. How could I forget? Our mutual friend Anatoly Gringovitch has asked me to keep an eye on you. Not that you need it. You've been in Nice before, haven't you?

-Well, I might need some help. I've been here to play on the jazz festivals, but I was picked up, delivered, played, jammed with the other artists and put on a plane with no sleep and sent to the next gig. Can't say I “know” Nice.

-Well, I'll be in Nice for a few weeks scouting locations for a new movie. So if you are going to be in the area, I can help you out. I won't have a car until Saturday, but I can show you around.

-After I deliver the paintings, I'll be back to play a gig with the Monte Carlo Orchestra. I'm staying at Villa Arson. I'll be in Nice for almost three weeks. Maybe longer. They are renting me a car, so if we can find time, we could cruise around the area for good restaurants and check out the sights.

-Well, I'm staying at the Hotel Beau Rivage in the Old City. Probably a smelly old flop, but it is centrally located.

Now that the opening formalities had been completed, there was an awkward silence between the two men.

-Ben, began Gabe, I received a note from Anatoly which said I should keep an eye on you and help you anyway I could. Do you know why he would send me such a message?

-Not off-hand. But I may not be able to deliver one of the paintings; and if not, can I stash it with you? It's a painting by Gringovitch.

-Not a problem, but I'm not sure how safe that hotel is for storing things like a Gringovitch original painting. But I do know a bank in Nice that can safely store items like a painting. I have an account there, so it should be no problem to store a painting there for a few

days, or even weeks. I may be able to set it up so you can access the painting without my being present.

Ben was a little wary of Gabe ‘s flip answers and his replies were too quick to be real. Was Gabe really a clever well-connected guy, or was he conning Ben out of a pricey painting? Ben's radar seemed to indicate that Gabe was a friend, but his radar hadn't been working too reliably recently. On the other hand, Gringovitch trusted Gabe enough to ask him to help Ben.

-So Ben, tell me, did you boff that stew Claudia on some previous flight?

-Almost. The business end was on the edge of business when the plane hit some serious turbulence and she had to break it off and attend to the passengers. Had blue balls for the rest of the flight. Hurt like a son-of-a-bitch.

-Reminds me of high school days, heavy petting in the back seat of my dad's Chevy Bel Aire. Those bitches would let you get them off and then leave you aching for hours. Real boner blues.

They both had a good chuckle over Gabe's expression: Boner blues.

-So have you ever had sex on an airplane?

-Yeah, once with an Air India woman. She was a hot young thing at the time. It was pretty furtive and awkward. The best traveling sex was on a train with Zoë, my estranged wife. We let the train do all the work. Took a long time, but was the best orgasm either of us have ever had.

-Yeah, well trains are all sex, hurtling gamates.

-Gamates?

-Yeah, you know sperm and eggs. When they conjoin, it becomes a zygote, the beginning of life.

-Well, Gabe, I don't know about that, but I've paid for enough abortions when there has been a direct hit.

-Well, I can't relate, I have three kids and I wouldn't part with any of them. But I'm a family man. I've had the occasional side meat, but nothing serious.

-I guess I always lacked the courage. I think I could make a family with that Dutch stewardess, but she's pretty cold on me.

-She may have seemed pretty aloof to you, but it might be an act. You know, Ben, women can be very crafty, especially if they want something.

-Well, I travel almost as much as a stewardess, so that would be a lousy life. Zoë has split because of my traveling and philandering. She's been no angel, either.

Gabe looked up at the monitor, checking out the film.

-You know, this is a good film, but five times in one year?

-That's about as many times as I've seen it, or parts of it. But then I was on an airplane a couple of times a week for three months.

-That must have been rough.

-Well, Gabe, it's all part of the peripatetic musician's life. You learn to sleep on planes, and conserve your resources for the money moments. Most outside observers think you're stupid, but you just don't want to spend the energy to get involved.

-I never thought of that. Thinking about it, it makes a lot of sense.

-Well, I don't feel too smart at the moment. One of the dealer's involved in the sale of the Gringovitch paintings has hired Claudia, the head stewardess, to tail me until I deliver all the paintings.

-That's pretty strange, Ben. Are you sure? Aren't you being paranoid?

-Not at all, I saw a telegram from Gringovitch's partner, Dan Arris, in her purse. He instructs her to tail me. Or, as he wrote, keep eyes on me.

Both men stared at the television monitor, just as Joubert is about to assassinate Joe Turner's co-workers.

-So, Ben, what device does Gringovitch, or this Arris guy, have in place to make sure you have delivered the paintings? You know, some receipts or something that proves you actually delivered the paintings?

-Arris cut a 100 franc note in three parts. I have one part and the two consignees have the other two parts. He used a custom filed pinking scissors to cut the note. It can't be duplicated. Arris might a

have an exact copy, but otherwise, I have to get the two missing parts as proof of delivery before I can get my contrabass clarinet in order to play the gig in Monte Carlo. I'm also supposed to get some cash

-This is the kind of problem I relish. I know a guy in Nice, Pascal LeRoi. He goes by the name of Le Roi de Quoi, the King of What. He is France's most famous *mise-en-scène* artist. He can do anything. Probably the most versatile artist I know. He can duplicate what you need. So if one or both of the consignees fail to deliver, you will have some proof and you will hold the pictures, which you can dispose of how you see fit. I would suggest keeping it honest after you get your instrument. But to solve the immediate problem, I can help.

-Can this King guy keep his mouth shut?

-Tighter than an oyster shell.

-How do I contact him?

-Leave that to me.

-Well, Gabe, the problem is, I'm on a tight schedule. I have to deliver the picture in Nice, then take a train to Marseilles, deliver the second picture and take an overnight train to Paris. Then at noon, I go to the Pont Neuf to the first Bouquiniste and buy a poster for a concert I gave a few years ago with the three-part 100 franc note. That guy, Miguel Martinez, will tell me where I can find my contrabass clarinet. Then I take an afternoon flight back to Nice and meet the manager of the Monte Carlo Orchestra who will rent me a car and show me to my lodgings at Villa Arson. Saturday, I spend all day with the composer of the composition: the redoubtable Professor Hans Hausenstockmann.

-Ben, you are traveling on the edge.

-There's worse. The stewardess Claudia is the ex-wife, or so she says, of Dan Arris, he's the other partner in this deal. She just broke or sprained her ankle, or is pretending she did, during the recent turbulence. Since she can't tail me, she wants me to take her on my deliveries. So I might have to travel with a woman in a wheelchair who is watching my every move. Pretty easy…who could write such a script.

Both men were silent. They looked at Robert Redford on the screen. Ben started identifying with Joe Turner, Redford's character. Gabe was coming to the same conclusion.

-OK, Ben here's the plan. We leave the airport together and go to my hotel. You go to this Yolande's restaurant and check it out. Take the first picture with you. Leave the Marseilles picture at my hotel. If you can't deliver the first picture we will stash it in my bank. I will visit Le Roi de Quoi. I'm sure he can duplicate the cuts in the 100 franc note. I'll give you a 100 franc note with three cuts that duplicate the cuts of the customized pinking shears. This way you will get your contrabass, no matter what. You go to Marseilles with the second picture. If you can't deliver it, keep it with you and bring it back here. We will put it in the bank.

-What about Claudia?

-Well, she will probably have to go to a hospital for X-rays. While she's there, you can slip out and try to deliver the first picture. Meanwhile, I'll contact Le Roi de Quoi and get you a copy of the cut up 100 franc note.

-How much will that cost?

-I'll take care of it. If I tap him for this movie, he will walk away with a percentage of the gross and probably a hundred grand.

-I hope this is not all smoke and mirrors. I could be in deep do-do if I don't show up on Friday night with my contrabass.

-Ben, m'man, relax you worry too much. Gringovitch has hundreds of paintings, so he loses two for a couple of weeks. No big deal.

-Easy for you to say. It's my hide on the line.

-What's the worse thing that can happen?

-I could go to jail, big time, or get whacked by Arris or one of his Ruskies.

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Gringovitch went up to his studio to get the third painting -- the one he was taking to sell to the rich Hollywood Armenia lawyer, Arno Aghajanian in Monte Carlo. Gringovitch had just received a call from Alitalia confirming his Friday night flight to Rome. He picked

up the painting and examined the packaging. His heart sank. This was the painting that was to go to Yolande! The painting he was to take, which held the real, not forged Gorky *Unfaithful Wife*, must be with Ben. This packaging said it was *Life Forms* by Anatoly Ginrgovitch,1976. He was supposed to have *The Red and The Black* which was the over painting he did on the original Gorky painting of the *Unfaithful Wife*.

In a panic, Gringovitch ripped the packaging open. Sure enough, the painting was *Life Forms*, not *The Red and The Black*. He had screwed up big time. Ben Clarone was winging his way to Nice with the real Gorky *Unfaithful Wife*. The problem was, Yolande was supposed to reveal the under-painting of *Life Forms,* an Arris-forged copy of *The Unfaithful Wife,* to Interpol in a swap for three FLNC Corsican Separatist who were serving a life sentence in a French jail for a bombing. Unless he stopped Ben from delivering that painting, Interpol would have the real Gorky. Everything had the potential to go down the toilet real fast.

He had to contact Ben as soon as he arrived in Nice. Fortunately, he had asked Gabe Benjamin to watch Ben Clarone. If he could get a telegram to Gabe, or even Ben, he could stop the delivery of the wrong painting to Yolande. He hurried downstairs to his office to call Western Union, nearly tripping in his wild haste.

To be continued.